



## Survey Reveals How People Make Ethical Decisions

*The Wired Word* for the Week of March 15, 2026

### **In the News**

Dutch activist [Corrie Ten Boom](#) faced a moral dilemma when a Nazi soldier inquired whether she had a radio in the house. A strong Christian, she believed it was wrong to lie, but she knew that admitting the truth about the radio hidden under the stairs could endanger the lives of innocent people involved in the resistance.

How do people decide what is the right thing to do? Do you sometimes find yourself asking whether you must choose the lesser of two evils? Or whether a good end would justify a sinful means to getting to that end?

Consider the classic case of a man whose wife needs an expensive drug to save her life, but the price is too high. Would he be justified in stealing the drug?

The Pew Religious Landscape Study recently posed questions about what influences decisions survey participants make about moral issues.

Researchers wanted to know how important each of the following components was in the ethical decision-making of respondents: religious teachings and belief, logic and reason, practical experience and common sense, and scientific information.

About 56% said logic, reason, practical experience and common sense are extremely important to them when making decisions about what is right and wrong. Another 37% say they are very important. Nearly all Americans say they rely on these factors in their decision-making.

On the other hand, only 53% of respondents said that religious teachings were extremely or very important to them when making moral decisions.

Three out of four Americans say scientific information is extremely or very important to them when making moral decisions.

When broken down by religious identities, the results show that larger numbers of evangelicals (56%) and black Protestants (48%) are more likely to ask, "What does the Bible say about this?" compared to 25% of mainline Protestants and Catholics who do the same. The latter clusters and those who are less active with formal religion (attending religious services less frequently) also place more emphasis on science, while evangelicals and those who are highly active religiously are less likely to rely on scientific information.

In another 2025 Pew Research Center survey conducted of more than 30,000 people in 25 nations regarding how citizens rated the morality of their fellow countrymen, Americans were more likely than people in other countries to view fellow citizens as immoral. Some of these attitudes appear to be driven by political polarization.

Researchers asked survey respondents to rate nine different behaviors as morally unacceptable or wrong, morally acceptable or not a moral issue. The behaviors participants evaluated included drinking alcohol, homosexuality, having extramarital affairs, using marijuana, gambling, using contraception, getting a divorce, having an abortion, and viewing pornography.

Christians are often among the most likely to consider each of the nine behaviors to be morally unacceptable. There are differences from country to country, demonstrating that culture, gender, age, religious affiliation, and level of educational attainment all have an influence on people's attitudes about morality.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[The Moral Reasoning Gap in American Christianity. \*Graphs About Religion\*](#)

[In 25-Country Survey, Americans Especially Likely to View Fellow Citizens as Morally Bad. \*Pew Research Center\*](#)

[Graph: Where Do You Fall on the Moral Spectrum. \*The Chronicle of Higher Education\*](#)

[The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion. \*Goodreads\*](#)

[Trump Says His Only Limit on His Global Powers Is His 'Own Morality' \(Video 1:15\). \*The New York Times\*](#)

### **Applying the News Story**

Mathematician Alfred North Whitehead defined morality in any given time or place as "what the majority then and there happen to like and immorality is what they dislike."

Why do some people seem to have very few moral convictions while others seem to have simple answers to every ethical question? Where do our ideas of what is moral or immoral, good or evil, come from? Are we born with them, or do they need to be planted, nurtured, and grown to maturity? And is it possible to lose one's moral bearings? If so, how might that happen? And how might we guard against such a tragedy? Are Christian morals

black/white, or are there gray areas that we choose? Consider these and other questions as you discuss the issue of morality together.

### **The Big Questions**

1. How would you define morality? How do we know right from wrong?
2. How do we decide which moral issues should be matters of individual liberty, and which require community engagement and/or regulation? For those matters in the second category, how do we determine what kind of regulation is required, and who is qualified to make such guardrails?
3. Is morality "an intrinsic human" quality, as filmmaker David Lowery asserts, that "exists separate from faith"? Or, as atheist Christopher Hitchens put it, "Do we innately have morality, or do we get it from celestial dictation?"
4. What kind of moral codes should government agencies, businesses or religious organizations have? Who should be responsible for developing and upholding or enforcing such codes, and how should that be done? Do "codes of ethics" work?
5. How does a leader's moral/ethical standard impact those who follow that leader? How does it impact the mission of the enterprise?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Judges 17:6**

*In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.* (This verse is restated at the end of the book, in Judges 21:25.) (For context, read [Judges 17:1-6](#).)

The book of Judges describes a period in the history of the tribes of Israel before they were ruled by kings. During this period, morality collapsed with increasing brutality, corruption, idolatry, gang rape, the murder of peaceful civilians, and civil war. Doing what they all thought was right in their own eyes was disastrous. The propensity for wanting our own way was not unique to Israel. We see it throughout human history. The prophet Isaiah says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, President Donald Trump was asked whether he saw any checks on his power on the world stage. He answered, "My own morality. My own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me. And that's very good." In a later interview with CBS News, he asserted, "I'm a moral person. ... I have a very high grade of morality."

Former President Barack Obama once told the *Chicago Sun-Times* that his values came from his "inner voice," and defined sin as being "out of alignment" with those values.

Ethicist Jonathan King wrote, "I believe in pursuing my own morality. That is all I have ever stuck by. It is my own morality that really matters." English social commentator and essayist William Hazlitt noted, "Every man, in his own opinion, forms an exception to the ordinary rules of morality."

But the Teacher tells us, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death" ([Proverbs 14:12](#)).

**Questions:** What are the limitations and flaws of a society built on the philosophy that all people are entitled to do what is right in their own eyes? Why is reliance on one's own standards problematic at best and potentially calamitous?

### **Isaiah 5:20-21, 23**

*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and shrewd in their own sight! ... who acquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the innocent of their rights! (For context, read [Isaiah 5:18-30](#).)*

The prophet Isaiah decries those who pervert the meaning of good and evil, as if just by calling bitter poison sweet water, you can make it so. He calls down woe on those who pervert justice, letting the guilty who can pay a bribe off scott-free while depriving the innocent of their rights.

This passage reminds us of the incident in [Mark 3:22-30](#) when Jesus was accused of casting demons out of people by the power of Satan, the ruler of the demons. Jesus equates this accusation (calling doing good evil) with blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is the unforgivable eternal sin.

Paul writes, "hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good" (Romans 12:9).

**Questions:** How can we hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good if we can't tell the difference between good and evil? What would motivate people to call evil good and good evil? Give examples of "gaslighting," telling people that darkness is really light, and light is really darkness, that bitter is really sweet and sweet is really bitter. Why does this kind of behavior lead to sorrow? How can we protect ourselves from this kind of deception?

### **Hebrews 5:14**

*But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. (For context, read [Hebrews 5:11-14](#).)*

In [Genesis 3:4-11](#), the first man and woman disobeyed God and ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but the knowledge they gained caused

them shame and fear, so that they hid from God. The author of the book of Hebrews writes that those who are young in faith need to be "trained by practice to distinguish good from evil," not only to *know* the difference, but to repeatedly *choose* good rather than evil.

**Questions:** How can the church train those who are young in faith to distinguish good from evil? What kind of practical training might that involve?

### **Romans 12:2**

*Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect. (For context, read [Romans 12:1-5](#).)*

Paul is concerned that the Romans live in a way that is "holy and acceptable to God" (v. 1). This kind of behavior springs from being able to "discern what is the [good and acceptable and perfect] will of God." In subsequent verses, Paul says we should humbly live with one another in the body of Christ, serving each other in love, affection, joy, hope, patience, generosity, hospitality, empathy and peace.

**Questions:** What is involved in "the renewing of the mind"? In what way does the renewing of the mind lead to transformation, so that one is not "conformed to this age"?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. What common thread undergirds these statements about morality?

The true basis of morality is utility; that is, the adaptation of our actions to the promotion of the general welfare and happiness; the endeavor so to rule our lives that we may serve and bless mankind. -- Social reformer Annie Besant

To love our neighbor as ourselves is such a truth for regulating human society, that by that alone one might determine all the cases in social morality. -- English philosopher John Locke

The sturdiest pillars of human morality are compassion and a sense of justice. -- Primatologist Frans de Waal

Morality is the basis of things and truth is the substance of all morality. -- Human rights activist Mahatma Gandhi

2. What do you think about the way these individuals view morality?

Honor is simply the morality of superior men. Immorality: the morality of those who are having a better time. -- Atheist and satirist H.L. Mencken

Morality is the weakness of the brain. -- French poet Arthur Rimbaud

If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject. ... Force and mind are opposites. Morality ends where a gun begins. -- Atheist and proponent of unfettered self-interest Ayn Rand

Force always attracts men of low morality. -- Theoretical physicist Albert Einstein

3. Would it surprise you to learn that the author of the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson also wrote that "Money, not morality, is the principle commerce of civilized nations"?

"Is it moral for rich countries to use such a high proportion of the world's resources or for investment bankers to earn large bonuses?" wondered American economist and winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Economics Edmund Phelps.

"There is a crisis of public morality. Instead of policing bedrooms, we ought to be doing a better job policing boardrooms," wrote former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich.

What is the relationship of money and morality? Why do you think the research cited in the news focused on the particular issues mentioned, while ignoring questions of morality in the realms of economics, politics, governance, use of force, and social structure?

4. Discuss the relationship between science and morality. Here are a few opinions about that:

Scientists search for truth. Philosophers search for morality. --  
American lawyer Alan Dershowitz

But the imposition of morality onto science -- where it does not belong -- has become rampant in recent years. -- Academy Award-winning film director Bill Condon

Science is the search for truth, that is the effort to understand the world: it involves the rejection of bias, of dogma, of revelation, but not the rejection of morality. -- American chemist and peace activist Linus Pauling

Science by itself has no moral dimension. But it does seek to establish truth. And upon this truth morality can be built. -- American gynecologist William Masters

5. Discuss this from TWW consultant (and physicist) James Gruetzner.

"Martin Luther once wrote to a colleague, 'God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong [i.e., sin boldly], but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice.' Jesus has taken the guilt of our sins: We are each 'at the same time saint and sinner.' This is quite empowering: We will make wrong choices -- or have to decide between

different sins -- but that does not destroy our relationship with God. *That* relationship is based on what Jesus did, not on what we do."

### **Responding to the News**

You may wish to take a [Moral Foundations Test](#), based on the Moral Foundations Theory developed by psychologists Jonathan Haidt, Jesse Graham and Craig Joseph. It takes about 15 minutes.

**Prayer** suggested by [Proverbs 3:5-6](#); [Titus 3:3-5](#); [Psalm 145:7-9](#); [Psalm 68:10](#); [Psalm 136:1](#); [Acts 10:38](#); [Luke 8:1-3](#)

O God, who is abundant in goodness to all, in your goodness you provide for the needy. We give you thanks, for you are good; your steadfast love endures forever! May your Spirit teach us what is good, and empower us to follow Jesus, doing good and bringing good news of great joy to all people, just as he did! Amen!